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ABSTRACT

The emotion-goal-regulation model of parenting maintains that the degree to which parents' behavior, cognitions, and emotions are organized by outcomes important to children (child orientation) is an important influence on parent-child interaction. This study examined the impact of negative parental moods on parents' ability and motivation to attend to and address their children's concerns and whether parent-child interaction proceeds more smoothly when parents are child-oriented than when they are not. Participating were 29 intact families from four preschools in Austin, Texas with target children ranging in age from 3 to 6 years. Parents independently completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, a mood measure. Audiotapes were made of 15 dinner-time conversations at which both parents and the target child were present; the two dinner times for which mothers reported their most extreme positive and negative moods were selected for transcription and analysis. The transcripts were coded for mothers' child-orientation during conversation turns, verbal conflict, and affective expression. The results indicated that mothers spoke an average of 118 turns per dinner, with no differences between negative and positive mood days. Thirty-seven percent of mothers' turns were coded as actively promoting a particular agenda. Mothers were less oriented toward their children's concerns when experiencing a negative mood than when experiencing a positive mood. The percentage of mothers' turns that were self-oriented was very low, accounted for only 2 percent of mothers' total turns. Children expressed less negativity toward mothers and less conflict following mothers' child-oriented turns than following mothers' turns in general. (KB)

What's Being Served for Dinner?

Maternal Mood, Child Orientation, and Mother-Child Interaction During Family Dinnertime Conversation

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The nature of effective parenting has been a major research focus over the last few decades, yet relatively little is known about the specific processes and mechanisms involved. Perhaps one of the most critical components of effective parenting to be identified by the literature is responsiveness. Among other things, responsive parenting has been associated with secure parent-child attachment (see for example, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Crockenberg, 1981), and the development of social and cognitive competence in children (see for example, Bakeman & Brown, 1980; Baumrind, 1989; Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984). Despite the amount of attention given to the construct of responsiveness and the vast support for its importance to optimal child development, the specifics of why, when, and how parents are responsive are less established.

One model of parenting recently put forth to understand how responsive parenting is organized and operates is an emotion-goal-regulation model (Dix, 1991,1992). At the heart of this model is the notion that effective parenting involves empathic, child-oriented goals and emotions. It is proposed that parents' level of *child orientation*, or the degree to which parents' behavior, cognition, and emotions are organized by outcomes important to children, is an important influence on parent-child interaction. According to this model, from moment to moment parents have goals they wish to promote, and they enact plans and behaviors to meet these goals. Evaluation of whether these goals are being promoted or thwarted leads parents to experience specific emotions. In general, negative emotions can be expected when obstacles to goals are encountered; whereas, positive emotions can be expected when goals are promoted. For example, a parent may have the goal of completing dinner in time to attend a meeting. Certain emotions will be activated in the parent during dinner contingent on whether or not this goal is being promoted. If a child is spending a lot of time talking instead of eating, negative affect in the parent is likely.

Once activated, goal-based emotions influence parents' subsequent motivation, cognition, expressive behavior, and behavioral tendencies. In the dinnertime example given above, negative affect motivates the parent to get the child to eat rather than talk. A very different scenario might occur if the parent did not have the goal of finishing dinner, but instead wanted to find out about the child's day. In this case, the child's talking would not be perceived as an obstacle to the parent's agenda and would elicit positive rather than negative emotions in the parent. As a result, the parent's reaction to the child would probably be more positive and sensitive than in the first scenario. By influencing parents' emotions, cognition, and behavior, parental goal structures, or agendas, play a critical role in determining how parent-child interaction proceeds. For this reason, the nature of the goals parents choose to promote may provide valuable insight into parent-child functioning.

According to Dix (1991, 1992), parents' goals may be described primarily as *self-oriented* (promoting parents' concerns) or *child-oriented* (promoting children's concerns). Parent-oriented goals may involve the child (e.g. getting the child ready in time for an appointment) or have nothing directly to do with the child (e.g. getting the car repaired). Child-oriented goals, on the other hand, are promoted primarily because of empathy with children's needs and desires (e.g. playing a game with the child). In addition to self- and child- oriented goals, parents may also be oriented toward a third type of goal, those dealing with socialization issues. Parents often have such goals, which run counter to children's concerns at the moment,

but in the long run are often in children's best interests (e.g. teaching them appropriate dinnertime behavior).

The emotion-goal-regulation perspective suggests that child-oriented goals and the emotions they activate are the key to responsive parenting (Dix, 1991, 1992). Parents who have many child-oriented concerns will be motivated by empathic emotions, to promote many of the child's wants and needs. In other words, parents who have their child's concerns as a large part of their goal structure will experience emotions based on whether the child's goals are being promoted. These empathic emotions will motivate parents to promote child-oriented agendas when possible.

Although the role of child orientation in parenting has been well specified by the emotion-goal-regulation model, this important variable has received limited empirical attention. Extant studies have measured variables only somewhat related to child orientation. A small body of literature exists concerning parents' ability to take a child's point of view, or a *child-centered perspective*. This group of studies supports the notion that responsive, effective parenting requires an ability to consider situations from a child's vantage point. Being child-oriented as specified by Dix's model (1991) however, extends this idea and suggests that effective parents must not only be *aware* of children's perspectives, but also be *invested in* and *motivated by* children's goals.

Because empirical work on this variable is scarce, little is known about what factors influence a parent's level of child orientation. Why are some parents more child-oriented than others? At the same time, why is a parent child-oriented during one interaction and parent-oriented during another? Although both questions are important, the current study addresses only the second: factors that may account for variations in a parent's level of child orientation across different situations or at different points in time. One important factor may be parents' affective states; moods may influence the extent to which a parent is self-oriented or child-oriented at a given moment. Negative moods may turn parents' attention and energy inward and decrease the likelihood that children's concerns will be recognized and promoted.

The role of mood states in parenting, however, has received limited empirical attention, and research specifically examining the relationship between mood and child orientation is non-existent. Social psychological research on mood and attentional focus suggests that negative mood serves to increase self-focus and decrease other focus. Although distinct from attentional focus, child orientation may be similarly affected by mood state, such that negative moods increase the tendency that attention and motivation will serve self-concerns rather than others' concerns. This hypothesis is consistent with the recent finding that mild maternal depression was associated with decreases in child-oriented concerns and increases in self-oriented concerns (Thompson, 1995).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the variable child orientation in the context of daily family interaction. What behaviors, cognition and emotions are activated when a parent is child-oriented? Under what conditions can a parent be expected to be child-oriented? How does parent-child interaction proceed when parents are child-oriented versus when they are not?

According to an emotion-goal-regulation perspective, these issues are at the crux of understanding parent-child relationships. Using transcripts of family dinnertime conversations, the current study addressed the following questions: 1) do negative parental moods decrease parents' ability and motivation to attend to and address their children's concerns; that is, do they

decrease parents' level of child orientation; and 2) does parent-child interaction proceed more smoothly when parents are child-oriented than when they are not?

Method

Participants

Participants were twenty-nine intact families from four preschools in Austin, Texas. Target children ranged in age from 3 to 6 years old. This age range was chosen because the audiotaping method necessitated verbal ability and because children of this age make regular demands on parents at dinnertime, providing an opportunity to study parent-child conflict.

The mean annual household income for this sample was between $40,000 and $50,000. On average, mothers and fathers were college educated and had a mean of 16 years of education. Mothers working outside the home full-time comprised 39% of the sample, whereas 43% worked outside the home part-time, and 18% worked full-time as homemakers. All families were Caucasian, with the exception of one Hispanic family.

Participants were recruited through letters sent to parents of children enrolled in four area preschools. Of the 93 families contacted, 37 were intact and agreed to participate in the study. Of those 37 families, 7 dropped out prior to completing the study, and 1 family was dropped because of failure to record interactions clearly.

Study Procedure

Participating families were instructed to tape record 15 dinnertime conversations at which mother, father, and target child were present. Because it is a time when family members discuss the concerns and activities of the day, dinnertime provided an optimal opportunity to study family interaction. Dinnertime is also a time when parents expect children to adhere to social and family norms, providing an opportunity to study parenting behaviors.

The following measures were used in the current analyses:

PANAS -- Prior to dinnertime, mothers and fathers independently completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule. The PANAS is a brief mood measure consisting of twenty adjectives. Participants indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 how well (from *very slight or not at all* to *extremely*) each word describes their current affective state. When a short-term time frame is used, as it was in this study, the PANAS reflects temporary state dimensions, or moods (Watson & Clark, 1984; Tellegen, 1985). Average alphas for current mood are .87.

The two dinnertimes for which mothers reported their most extreme moods were selected for transcription and analysis. Selection of mothers' best- and worst- mood days was based on converting daily Positive Affect and Negative Affect scores from the PANAS to *z*-scores and choosing the two days for each mother for which the combined NA/PA *z*-scores were the most extreme. Negative mood days were characterized by the combination of negative affect (high NA) and low engagement (low PA); whereas positive mood days were characterized by positive affect (low NA) and high engagement (high PA). For the 29 participating families, this method yielded 58 dinnertimes for analyses. The transcribed conversations for these dinners had been coded previously for conflictual behavior and emotional expression (Dix, Zambarano, & Bryant, 1996).

Child Orientation --To measure the extent to which mothers were child-oriented, the Self/Other Orientation During Conversation (SODC) code was developed. This code serves to assess whose concerns are being attended to and actively promoted during conversation. According to the SODC code, each turn during a conversation receives one of the following

codes:

(1) *self-oriented* for statements promoting the speaker's agenda at the expense of another's agenda (e.g., conflict, criticism of others, refusals of others' requests, opposition of a goal expressed by another);
(2) *other-oriented* for statements promoting another's agenda over the speaker's own agenda (e.g., praise, deferring or compromising, emotional support and encouragement, expressions of empathy or concern, apologies, unelicited helping, conversations with children that uplift, engage, or educate);
(3) *influence-oriented* for parental statements issued to influence children's behavior during dinner according to social norms or family rules. It is assumed that parents' attempts to get children to eat, sit, talk, and behave in certain ways at the dinner table do not reflect a personal self-agenda on the part of parent, but rather reflect parents' concerns with teaching children appropriate behavior. Because socialization goals often run counter to children's immediate agendas (despite their long-term benefit to children), it was decided that such turns should receive a unique code. ;
(4) *neutral* for statements that did not clearly promote a specific agenda - Many conversational turns serve as necessary, everyday components of progressing through a family meal. Because they are not indicative of motivation to promote a particular agenda, these perfunctory turns were coded as neutral;
or (5) *uncodeable* for statements that were incomprehensible or inaudible.

Twenty-six percent of the transcripts were double-coded for reliability purposes. The average kappa coefficient of agreement for the 5 coding categories across these 15 reliability transcripts was .77 (min. = .59, max. = .92).

Verbal Conflict Code -- Written transcripts of dinner conversations were coded according to the Verbal Conflict Code (VCC; Dix & Zambarano, unpublished, 1991). The VCC was developed to identify statements that communicate conflict with a present family member. Conflictual statements were defined as unwanted commands or restrictions, as well as those statements which express disagreement, resistance, threat, insult, or accusation toward another. The average kappa for four coders across all 58 transcripts was .71, indicating good reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Because conflictual turns by definition promote the speaker's agenda over another's, they are considered self-oriented. Therefore, the SODC and VCC codes are not independent. Given the conceptual overlap between these codes, mothers' turns were not analyzed using these codes simultaneously. The level of conflict between mothers and children during dinner instead was measured by analyzing children's turns using the VCC. Each child turn that followed a mother's turn was coded as conflictual or non-conflictual.

Affective Expression Code -- Dinnertime transcripts were coded using the Affective Expression Code. The AEC identifies emotions being *expressed* in family conversation. Each spoken turn was coded as positive, negative, or neutral based on the tone of voice used by speaker, as well as the content of the turn. Coders listened to audiotapes of the dinnertime conversations as they read printed transcripts. Statements were coded as positive if they

communicated praise, support, affirmation, pride, joy, empathy, or affection; as negative if they communicated criticism, disagreement, frustration, worry, disappointment, or disapproval; and as neutral if they communicated neither positive nor negative affect. The average kappa for four coders across all 58 transcripts was .62, indicating adequate reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977).

As with the VCC, the AEC overlaps conceptually with the SODC code and the two codes were not deemed adequately independent for statistical analyses. For example, praise would always be coded as expressing positive affect and as other-oriented. For this study, the AEC was used only to assess children's expression of affect toward mothers. As with the VCC, each child turn that followed a mother turn was coded as expressing negative, positive or neutral affect.

Results

Mothers' Self-/Other- Orientation

For the 58 dinnertime conversations used in the analyses, mothers spoke an average of 118 turns per dinner. The number of mother turns on negative mood days did not significantly differ from the number of mother turns on positive mood days (Ms = 117.52, 118.21, $t = .079$, $p > .938$). Given that the length of each dinner and number of statements spoken differed for each family, proportions of mothers' turns rather than frequencies were used. Proportions were calculated separately for the positive-mood day and the negative-mood day to account for differences within the family in number of spoken turns across the two days. For each dinnertime, the number of self-oriented turns issued by the mother was divided by her total number of turns to yield a percentage of turns that were self-oriented. Percentages of mothers' turns that were child-oriented, father-oriented and influence-oriented turns were calculated in the same manner.

On average, 37% of mothers' turns during dinnertime were coded as self-, other- or influence- oriented; that is, this proportion of turns served to actively promote a particular agenda. The remaining 63% of mothers' turns were coded as neutral or uncodeable. When promoting an agenda, mothers typically promoted the concerns of their children. Across both mood days, 50% of mothers' turns that were coded as actively promoting an agenda were child-oriented, 45% were influence-oriented, 4% were self-oriented, and 1% were oriented toward fathers.

It was predicted that mothers would be less oriented toward children's concerns on their negative mood day than on their positive mood day. To test this, a planned paired-sample t-test was performed comparing the percentage of mothers' turns that were child-oriented on positive mood days with the same percentage on negative mood days. The t-test revealed that mothers were less oriented toward the concerns of their children when experiencing a negative mood than when experiencing a positive mood, $t = 2.12$, $df = 28$, $p < .05$. Thus, the hypothesis that negative maternal mood is associated with decreased orientation toward children was supported.

Additionally, it was predicted that mothers would be more self-oriented on their negative mood day than on their positive mood day. The percentage of mothers' turns that were self-oriented was on average very low, accounting for only 2% of mothers' total turns across both mood days. In fact, 6 mothers (20.7%) had no self-oriented turns for either dinnertime, 13 mothers (44.8%) issued such turns for only one of the dinnertimes, and only 10 (34.5%) mothers issued self-oriented turns on both days. Because mothers' self-oriented turns were so infrequent, a statistical test of the hypothesis that negative mood increases self-orientation in mothers was

invalid using this sample.

Mothers' Orientation and Child Behavior

A third hypothesis of the study proposed that when mothers were child-oriented, mother-child interaction would be marked by less negative affect than when mothers were self-oriented. The low frequency of self-oriented turns in mothers' conversation made such a comparison difficult. It was decided instead that the most conservative test of this hypothesis was to compare children's responses to child-oriented turns issued by mothers to a baseline of children's responses to mothers' turns in general. Children's turns immediately following mothers' child-oriented turns were compared with children's turns following all mothers' turns with respect to whether the child expressed negative, positive, or neutral affect. A paired sample t-test demonstrated that children express less negativity toward mothers following mothers' child-oriented turns than following mothers' turns in general, $t = 5.292$, $df = 28$, $p < .0001$. Although they expressed less negative affect, children did not express significantly more positive affect following mother's child-oriented turns than following mothers' turns in general, $t = -1.279$, $df = 28$, $p < .211$.

It was also predicted that mother-child interaction would be less conflictual when mothers were child-oriented than when mothers were self-oriented. Again because self-oriented turns were infrequent, a paired sample t-test was used to compare the percentage of children's turns that were conflictual following mothers' child-oriented turns with a baseline of the percentage of children's turns that were conflictual regardless of the nature of the mothers' turns. When compared to children's level of conflict following mothers' turns in general, children's level of conflict following mothers' child-oriented turns was significantly lower, $t = 7.123$, $df = 28$, $p < .000$. Thus, the results support the hypotheses stated above: when mothers are child-oriented, children tend to emit behavior that is less negative and less conflictual than when mothers are not child-oriented.

Although not specific hypotheses of the study, children's affect and conflict following mothers' influence-oriented turns were examined. Paired-sample t-tests revealed that children were less positive ($t = -5.920$, $df = 28$, $p < .0001$), more negative ($t = 3.374$, $df = 28$, $p < .005$), and more conflictual ($t = -6.408$, $df = 28$, $p < .0001$) following mothers' influence-oriented turns than following mothers' turns in general.

Discussion

Based on the social psychological literature on mood and attentional focus which suggests that negative affective state increase self-focused attention, it was predicted that negative moods would turn mothers' attention inward and motivate them to promote more self-oriented goals and fewer child-oriented goals during family interaction. Parents in negative moods may focus on self-oriented goals in an attempt to alleviate the negative affect they are experiencing. This proposal is consistent with the suggestion that individuals in depressed states turn their attention inward in an effort to understand and mitigate negative affect (see for example, Conway, Giannopoulos, & Mendelson, 1993). This process may decrease motivation and ability to focus on the concerns of others; in parents, this may lead to a decrease in child orientation. The present findings reveal that on average, when mothers reported being in a

negative mood they were less likely to promote children's concerns than when they reported being in a positive mood.

If negative moods cause parents' attention and motivation to be focused inward on self-goals at the expense of children's goals, why did the data presented here reveal a relationship between mood and child orientation, but no relationship between mood and self orientation? A part of the answer to this question appears to lie in the different frequencies with which mothers emit self-oriented and child-oriented turns. During an average dinnertime situation, mothers issue far more child-oriented turns than self-oriented turns, regardless of mood. The low frequency of mothers' self-oriented turns in this sample rendered a statistical analysis of the relationship between mood and self-orientation invalid. This may be attributable in part to the conservative definition of self-orientation used in this study. Furthermore, it may be that in situations other than dinnertime mothers emit self-oriented turns more frequently. During dinnertime, children, especially those who are preschool-aged, may make frequent demands and require a lot of adult attention. Parents' discussion and promotion of goals may be limited primarily in this situation to the topics of eating and progressing through dinner. Parents' levels of child and self orientation during other types of parent-child interaction should be examined as well. Other situations, such as getting children ready in the morning, may provide a more fertile context for examining how mood affects parents' promotion of self-oriented goals.

Another explanation for the low frequency of self-oriented turns in this sample may be the mild mood states reported by the mothers in this sample. This may also explain the small size of mood effects on child orientation. The demographic profiles of participating families, as well as mood states reported by the mothers, suggest that this sample was not particularly stressed. Stressors such as economic strain or single parenthood may increase the likelihood and severity of parents' negative moods. More intense negative mood states than those reported by this sample may lead to significant increases in self-orientation in parents. Clinically depressed parents, for example, may be unable to decenter and orient toward the concerns of their children. This may be one mechanism involved in the host of negative child outcomes associated with parent depression (see for example, Cummings & Davies, 1994). The high rates of depression in mothers of young children (Patterson, 1980) and the consequences of parental depression for child development underscore the importance of studying the impact of parental affective states on parenting variables such as child orientation.

Child-Orientation and Parent-Child Interaction

Although the long-term consequences of non-child-oriented parenting were beyond the scope of this study, its immediate effects on child behavior were examined. When mothers' turns were child-oriented, children expressed less negativity and conflict in response than when mothers were not child-oriented. These findings are consistent with the emotion-goal-regulation model (Dix, 1991, 1992). When parents have child-oriented goals, they are motivated by and invested in outcomes that will benefit children. It seems only logical that parenting organized by such goals would elicit positive and cooperative parent-child interaction, yet the present study is one of the first to demonstrate empirically a relationship between child orientation and parent-child interaction.

Interestingly, although children were found to be less negative and less conflictual when mothers were child-oriented, they were not found to be significantly more positive. Initially, this finding appears problematic for the hypothesis that child orientation leads to positive and

cooperative parent-child interaction. It may be however, that child orientation leads to succesful interaction primarily as a function of decreasing negative affect and conflict between parents and children. Often times when parents are child oriented, children may respond by being content and uninterrupted in their acitivities; if their concerns are being met, they may just continue along with little affective reaction. If their concerns are not being promoted however, children are likely to take notice and protest or try another attempt to get their needs met. Therefore, children's negative affectivity and conflict may be more affected by child orientation than children's positive affectivity.

The finding that children are less negative and conflictual when mothers are child-oriented should be regarded with caution. The current analyses do not preclude the possibilities of child effects and auto-contingency. That is, it is unclear how the nature of children's turns directly preceding mother turns influenced mothers' child orientation and subsequent child turns. Children who were less negative and less conflictual prior to a mother turn may have increased the likelihood that a mother be child-oriented, as well as decreased the likelihood that the child would be negative and conflictual following the mother. It is also very likely that during certain sequences of conversation (e.g. during an ongoing conflict), mother and child turns have bi-directional effects, making the picture of the relationship between mother orienation and child affect more complex. Further analyses of these data are needed to confirm the significance of the effects of mothers' levels of child orientation on children's negativity and conflict and to explore how the expressive behavior of mothers and children affect each other.

The data also suggest that child behavior is related to whether mothers promote influence-oriented goals. Following influence-oriented turns, children were more negative, more conflictual, and less positive than following mothers' turns in general. Although not a specific hypothesis of the study, it seems intuitive that mothers' attempts to control children's behavior will often be met with resistance from children, especially when mothers prohibit behavior that children are already engaged in. It is likely, however, that *how* mothers enforce socialization goals has a lot to do with how children respond. The nature of mothers' control attempts was not a focus of this study; however, these data suggest that parents' promotion socialization goals may have important implications for the affective quality of parent-child interaction.

Future Research on Child Orientation

The results indicate that mood states influence the degree to which a parent is child-oriented. Temporary parental mood states, however, are likely not the only determinant of child orientation and may not even be the most important. Why are some parents much more child-oriented in general than other parents? Future research on child orientation should focus on identifying the sources of individual differences and how the capacity for being child-oriented develops.

Parent levels of child orientation may be related to stable characteristics of parents, such as attachment, knowledge of child development, and capacity for empathy; or, they may be related to more temporary, context-based forces. For example, external variables such as marriage, work, and social support affect parents' ability to be child-oriented. Evidence exists that parents experiencing significant stress exhibit parenting deficits (see for example, McLoyd, 1990). Effects on parents' goal orientation are one mechanism by which this might occur. It will be important for future work in this area to examine the links between internal and external parent characteristics, emotions, child orientation and family functioning.

One interesting issue is the relationship between negative affectivity and child orientation on an individual-difference level. Individuals who are highly self-oriented across situations may also be more vulnerable to negative affect. They may experience more negative affect and once aroused may have a more difficult time coping with negative affect than individuals who are more child-oriented. In terms of parenting, mothers who are highly self-oriented in general may experience high rates of negative affect in interactions with their children and when in a negative mood may have more difficulty turning their attention to child-oriented concerns. This hypothesis is consistent with findings that chronic negative emotion in parents is associated with family dysfunction, such as abusive parenting (see review by Wolfe, 1985; Lahey, Conger, Atkenson, & Treiber, 1984). Parents who chronically experience negative mood states may rapidly establish a pattern of interaction with children characterized by opposing agendas, non-cooperativeness, and negativity.

Although fathers' turns during dinnertimes were coded in the same manner as mothers' turns, these data were not included in the present analyses. Fathers' moods and behavior during dinner, however, are likely to be an important influence on family interaction. For example, depending on their own mood and goal structures, some fathers may intervene on behalf of children when mothers are in negative moods. Some fathers may also take over the enforcement of socialization goals and the management of dinnertime when they are aware that their spouse is in a negative mood. Other fathers, perhaps those in negative moods, may aggravate the situation of mothers who are in a negative mood by promoting self-oriented goals at the expense of the goals of mothers and children. By focusing on mothers' moods and child orientation, the present study provides only part of the picture of how affect and child orientation are related to family functioning. Further research is needed concerning how the affective states and goal orientations of multiple family members interact to influence family outcomes.

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